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Working with Advanced Writers

Maxine Hairston

For the past several years I have been fortunate in my assignments as a writing teacher. I have been working almost exclusively with advanced writers in a major state university: honors freshmen who have placed out of the first required writing course, juniors and seniors who are voluntarily taking an advanced expository writing course, and graduate students who are taking a course in writing for publication. Many writing teachers, and particularly those who work regularly with developmental writers, might say, "What a pleasure to work with students like that. They must be easy to teach."

Well, yes and no.

Yes, I enjoy working with advanced students. Usually they are bright and most of them genuinely want to become better writers. They are energetic and cooperative students, frequently high achievers who carry a heavy academic load. Most of the undergraduates plan to go on to graduate or professional school. They value education, and they function well in a university environment. Any teacher senses the potential of students like these.

But no, they are not easy to teach. Most of them come into the course at a level of proficiency that has earned them good marks in previous writing courses, a level that may even be getting them A's on papers they write for other college courses. They have reached that level because they write standard English easily and because they have mastered formulas that enable them to spin out smooth, well organized papers quickly. Often, however, they suspect that they've been over-rewarded for those papers, that they didn't really deserve those grades that were earned so cheaply. In fact, many of them are taking advanced writing because they are dissatisfied with their writing even though it has been earning them high grades.

Yet the high grades are important to them; in fact, they are essential because most of the students face stiff competition to get into professional schools or to win fellowships. Thus, though they want to write better, they

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are understandably reluctant to take the risk of abandoning their formulas or changing their writing styles. What many of them seem to hope for is that they can become better writers either by finding new inspiration in the class or by learning more sophisticated formulas.

Now formulas for writing are unquestionably useful at times. When someone has only 45 minutes to write a supported argument on the Law School Admissions Test, that person can work better if he or she has a ready-made plan to draw on. Formulas can also help if one has to write an abstract, a case study, an annual report, or an essay examination, and all frequent writers need to know different kinds of routine strategies to call on when they need them. But advanced students are not going to grow as writers until they break through their formulas to take some risks and get involved in the messy and uncomfortable process of occasionally working beyond their depth. Like athletes in training, they will not become stronger unless they push themselves to new limits and attempt more than they can easily do. I have found, however, that persuading advanced writers to make that push is not easy.

Analyzing the Writing Problems of Advanced Students

In working with advanced students, I think it helps to begin by assessing the kind of writing that most of them are doing when they come into class. Then I think the teacher should try to understand why these advanced writers write as they do. That's important if one hopes to bring about change.

Generalizing from the classes I have been working with for the past several years and from papers I have seen from a cross-section of advanced writers, I believe that their writing, in addition to being conventionally correct, is apt to have these characteristics.

First, it's wordy. Probably because they are used to thinking of writing assignments in terms of the number of pages required and also because they are verbal and words come to them easily, advanced students are apt to pad their writing. They restate their points, start their sentences with strung-out phrases, favor verb phrases instead of direct verbs, use long noun clauses as subjects, embroider with extra adjectives, and generally use two sentences where one would do. Consequently, their prose is often inflated and overly decorative.

Second, the writing of advanced students tends to be heavy with nominalizations tacked together with passive verbs and prepositional phrases. Instead of writing, "We need to know . . .," the advanced writer writes, "There is a need for knowledge"; instead of writing "I want to be a judge," the advanced writer writes, "My ultimate objective is the obtainment of a judgeship." They favor sentences like "The trainability of dogs is well known," and "The necessity of implementing such a plan is obvious."

Third, their writing is impersonal. Advanced writers habitually use an

abstract and passive style that virtually excludes people from their writing. In their prose, "decisions are made" and "opportunities exist for the development of business." Paula Johnson, director of the writing program at Yale for several years, found that the freshmen writers at Yale excelled at this impersonal style,¹ and the research of Andrea Lunsford, director of writing at the University of British Columbia, confirms Johnson's observations. In analyzing writing samples of entering freshmen, Lunsford found that the writers whom essay evaluators classified as skilled used many more abstract words and nominalizations than did the unskilled writers; they also used far fewer personal pronouns.²

Fourth, advanced students' writing is often unrealistically ambitious. They are apt to tackle topics that are much too broad, giving their papers titles like "The American Sense of Humor," and "The Problem of Cheating in College," and beginning their papers with statements of commitment that they could not fulfill in less than 25 or 30 pages. They seem unaware of the responsibilities such topics impose on them. Graduate students are a little more realistic, but they too are likely to overestimate greatly how much they can handle responsibly in a short paper.

Fifth, the papers of advanced writers tend to be long on generalizations and short on specifics. So, of course, do those of beginning writers, but advanced writers seem even more prone to expect to pass smoothly phrased and correctly written generalizations off as genuine discourse. Lunsford's study supports this observation. She noted that a major difference between the content of the essays of basic writers and those of skilled writers was that the basic writers tended to draw on concrete personal experience when writing about topics such as advertising, but skilled writers expressed their ideas mostly in generalities and high level abstractions. Paula Johnson noted the same pattern.

Sixth, even advanced college writers seem to have almost no sense of audience when they write. Most of their papers are "teacher papers," written solely for the teacher in the role of judge and examiner, or they are what I call "blue sky" papers, written to some unidentified and faceless person. Even these advanced writers never seem to have considered what preconceptions their readers might bring to a text or what readers might expect of them as a writer. But this is not surprising since most of these advanced students tell me that they have never before had a composition teacher who even mentioned audience, much less stressed it as an important component of the writing situation. Even my graduate students have had almost no experience in analysis of audience.

The final product of these advanced writers, then, is apt to be wordy, dull, sometimes superficial, but mechanically correct writing. They display what Paula Johnson calls a "flat competence"; what they do not have is what Wayne Booth calls "the rhetorical stance."³ That is, they reveal no sense of audience for their writing, they show no sense of purpose except to fill a requirement,

and they have no persona or “voice.” Their writing reveals nothing of themselves.

To me, this lack of what Donald Stewart and others have called “the authentic voice” emerges as the chief problem of most advanced writers. Almost all of their other problems—wordiness, impersonal style, excessive generalities, fuzzy diction, bland verbs and ponderous nominalizations, and a fondness for conventional wisdom—stem from this central problem. Because these students have no sense of audience other than their teachers, and because they are often wary and distrustful of that audience, they are reluctant to let their real personalities show through their writing. As a result, when they write they often use language not as a means for communicating about something that genuinely interests them, but as a barrier. They create masks to keep from exposing the vulnerable real self. Sometimes the mask is that of the stodgy bureaucrat, spouting jargon and convoluted sentences; sometimes it is that of the cheerleader, dazzling the reader with flashy trivia and words like “fantastic” and “incredible”; sometimes students take on the role of pedantic scholar, using big words to impress and intimidate; and sometimes they assume the guise of the good and earnest citizen expressing virtuous sentiments.

It’s hard not to become exasperated with these masks, particularly when students begin to drop them in class and a teacher realizes that many of the people behind those masks have lively intelligences and astute, often witty, perceptions about their own world and the whole academic system. But what any teacher working with advanced students must realize is that this kind of pseudo-writing that can be so maddening for an instructor represents a major achievement to the students who have mastered it. Such writing does not grow out of a natural desire to communicate; rather it is learned. Moreover, students have developed these styles with considerable effort and for important reasons. Graduate students may have the worst problem of all, for some of them, following the examples of learned journals, have worked hard on cultivating an opaque and jargon-laden style.

Thus the first major task faced by a teacher of advanced writing is usually to persuade her students to abandon their stuffy and drab styles. I think one way teachers can promote the change is to bring in models of good, clear writing such as essays by John McPhee or Loren Eiseley; for graduate students, one could use the work of scholars who write clearly: for example, Cleanth Brooks and Wayne Booth. Using such examples encourages students to trust their own instincts about writing, and before long they learn to develop enough confidence to realize that if they have to fight their way through a piece of obscure prose, it probably isn’t well written. I find that with some encouragement, most advanced students are ready to discard their awe of language that deserves the same treatment as the Emperor’s New Clothes. I have also found that students respond well to a pragmatic approach, so I bring in articles

about the problems of bad writing in business and industry and quote the frequent pleas that people in that world make for brevity and clarity.

Speculations about Why Students Write Badly

The second task of teachers of advanced writing is to try to understand why their students write as they do. Why do so few competent students of writing use their well-developed basic skills to become lively and creative writers?

Undoubtedly we could find many reasons, some complex and some hard to document. Some of the reasons, however, are glaringly simple, and many of them can be traced directly to our own academic doorstep. For one thing, we know that many English teachers reward a wordy and dense writing style, one that is thick with nominalizations and passive verbs. Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams' article, "Style and Its Consequences: Do As I Say, Not As I Do,"⁴ illustrates that unfortunate truth. In fact, Andrea Lunsford concedes that probably one reason the evaluators gave high grades to the papers of the skilled writers in her research project was precisely that they were heavily nominal and impersonal. We also know that most students' experience with writing papers in school and college has conditioned them to believe that when teachers assign those papers, they are more concerned about length than about significant content. What else can we assume when a student's first question about any writing assignment is "How long does it have to be?" No wonder they pad their writing.

Surely another reason that advanced students tend to write wordy, inflated, and flat prose is that they associate serious writing and academic writing with a verbose and impenetrable style. And who can blame them if they are reading Herbert Marcuse or John Dewey in another course or if they are asked to read dense and abstract articles in academic journals?

Moreover, like the rest of us, our advanced writers are continually exposed to those baffling documents of everyday life such as directives from the Internal Revenue Service, stipulations on hospitalization policies, or directions for filling out financial forms. And like the rest of us, they seldom challenge such writing; rather they assume that if they can't understand it, they must be the ones at fault. Worse, they may even try to imitate a dense style they cannot comprehend, and sometimes the people who grade their writing help perpetuate the farce when they, in turn, reward writing they cannot understand. One has to suspect that highly verbal students sometimes try to see how much smoothly phrased nonsense they can con a teacher into accepting. William Perry's essay, "Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts" describes that kind of academic gamesmanship.⁵

Certainly some English teachers must also take direct responsibility for the bland and impersonal style at which so many advanced students excel. When teachers banish the pronouns "I," "you," and "me" from student writing,

they inevitably drive their students to writing sentences like “My career objective in college is obtaining admission to medical school,” and to filling their papers with passive verb constructions that do not force them to identify the person acting or to assign responsibility for actions. Discouraged, even prohibited, from mentioning themselves in their writing, astute students will cultivate a style that eliminates people. They will generalize about such topics as unemployment or crime or child abuse rather than write about actual people coping with those problems. And when we tell students not to use “I,” we also give them a strong *hidden* message even if we don’t intend to. We are really telling them, “Don’t talk about yourself. Your personal experience is neither important nor applicable to what we are doing in this class.” Under the circumstances, no wonder they put on masks.

I suspect that another reason potentially good students often write mediocre papers is that even at an advanced level they are understandably still confused about what it is that English teachers expect of them. They have trouble shaking the stereotype of English teachers as error-hunters whose chief function is to guard the purity of the language—and as some studies of grading have shown, some of us reinforce that image more than we realize.⁶ Thus they have a hard time taking the *content* of an assignment seriously and will tackle an impossibly broad topic, first, because they don’t believe the professor cares about what they write, and second, because on a very broad topic they can quickly generate an abundance of material without doing any research. The assignment’s not real anyway—it’s just a game both sides have agreed to play. But we should remember that for ambitious students, it’s a game with very high stakes. Teachers have great power over their lives, and students have a lot to lose if they don’t make good grades.

In reflecting about these behaviors that seem to me so typical of those of many writers I see in my advanced classes year after year, I am inclined to draw this hypothesis: in order to function successfully in the kinds of writing situations in which they have been working for most of their school careers, bright students have developed a battery of effective problem-solving strategies that will get them by most of the time. Several researchers, beginning with Emig in *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*,⁷ and continuing with Stallard,⁸ Pianko,⁹ and others, have remarked on how little time most good students spend preparing to write, how calmly and methodically they tackle a writing task, and how quickly they can complete an assignment about which they have no advance knowledge. Their writing behaviors suggest that skilled student writers have very little writing anxiety and that most of the time they think of writing a school paper as just another routine educational task to be handled like any other—a set of geometry problems to be solved or a translation to be made. It’s a job to be done.

Since we know that most of the writing that students do in high school or college is expository writing done for the teacher as examiner, we should not be surprised that students have adopted this attitude, seeking formulas that

will solve their assigned problems with the least amount of trouble. Many of their textbooks have encouraged the practice, suggesting that if one learns rules and masters patterns, writing becomes easy.

Now, as I suggested earlier, even though we tend to use the term "formulaic writing" in a pejorative sense, all writers need to be able to do it at times, and students are showing good survival instinct when they learn its rudiments. Unfortunately, however, when they are under pressure (and in college that seems to be most of the time), they will almost always choose the formula that requires the least amount of effort from them. Emig's account of the skilled writer Lynn, in *Composing Processes*, describes precisely this kind of choice. And over a period of years, such choices become habitual. Skilled writers tend to stick to what they do easily and well. They have successfully adapted to their environment, and they are reluctant to abandon strategies that have worked in the past even though a part of them really wants to do better work.

In the long run, however, their early adaptation and success may prove expensive for them. As John Warnock puts it,

Most writing teachers are familiar with the "good" high school writers who do not budge from their shallow attainments while their "poor" cohorts are suddenly going places. The phenomenon suggests that these "good" students have not only been misled, but that they have somehow been made to purchase their A's in high school at the expense of the future. The concept of good writing that they have developed (though it is probably not so much a concept as a defense against one) is not a platform for liberated action, but a cage. We may anticipate such a result whenever a student is forced to adopt a pseudoconcept of what ultimately constitutes good writing (no spelling or grammar errors, clear transitions, introduction, body, conclusion) in place of a true concept.¹⁰

At the college level I have found many fairly skilled writers who seem to have stabilized on the plateau of flat competence for another reason, one mentioned by Helmut Esau and Michael Keene in an article in *College English* applying the principles of second language learning to the teaching of writing. They point out that just as second language learners often "fossilize" at a certain level of learning and cease to improve their skills because they feel they know enough of the target language to communicate adequately, students who have written competently at the freshman level may psychologically resist learning skills that are needed for a junior/senior level course.¹¹ Advanced writing students who have fossilized often know they could become better writers, but either they are not willing to invest the necessary effort, or they have other concerns (such as doing well in organic chemistry) that take priority over working on their writing.

I have seen this attitude develop especially among students who are taking advanced writing courses with me on a pass/fail basis. With one eye on graduate school, they chose that option because it would protect them from the pos-

sibility of a damaging low grade on their transcripts. They often start the semester energetically, but as they begin to realize how hard they are going to have to work to earn an A on their final drafts, they fossilize at the B or C level. They're passing and they are unwilling to work any harder. Sometimes this group includes the most talented students in the class. Graduate students will often fossilize at the level of performance that has been earning them A's on what are really first drafts of papers in most of their courses. Even though they are not nearly so well satisfied with their writing as their instructors seem to be, they can't motivate themselves to put more effort on a paper if they see no tangible reward for doing so.

Now one might argue that when competent writers have come this far and are writing well enough to satisfy most of the demands put upon them, a teacher should leave them alone. As long as they realize that in their writing class, at least, they will not receive first-rate grades for second-rate work, they have a right to their masks and to their earned comfort. Well, perhaps. Certainly a teacher might well take that tack with many advanced students and especially with graduate students. They are mature enough to set their own priorities and have the right to be less than excellent. All of us make that choice at times.

Nevertheless, I persist in believing that it is almost a tragedy not to try to spur at least some of our skilled writers into realizing how well they *could* write if they would break through their shells and strive for real excellence. Those writers who stay with formulas cannot possibly experience the excitement of discovering new ideas and unexpected connections as they struggle to get a fleeting vision on paper before it is lost. They cannot possibly know the satisfaction of working at the very limit of their abilities, writing something that no one has ever written before, something that surprises them even as it appears on the paper. They cannot feel the exhilaration of watching fresh thoughts surface as they harvest the products of the subconscious or know the satisfaction of having stayed with a writing task when it seemed hopeless, only to find on finishing that they have crafted something to be proud of. In sum, one cannot know the thrill of creativity until one has pushed at one's limits and moved into unexplored and perhaps frightening territory to try something new.

Getting Students to Break Away from Formulas

But how does a teacher challenge students to break through their barriers of complacency and timidity and help them start growing as writers?

I think one source we can turn to for help is humanistic psychology, thinkers like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers who believe that all people have a positive desire to learn and to create. But, as Maslow puts it,

So-called learning theory in this country has based itself almost entirely

on deficit-motivation with goal objects usually external to the organism. . . . This is of little help in solving the problem of growth and self-actualization.¹²

It seems to me that too often writing students—beginners as well as advanced—work from deficit-motivation, that is, to avoid getting a poor grade. They also work for goals that are externally imposed; that is, they try to emulate some model of writing or to satisfy some criteria that they have gotten from a textbook or a teacher rather than ones they have created for themselves.

Now if we are going to get our advanced students to move beyond deficit-motivation, we have to encourage them to develop their potential as writers because it is intrinsically rewarding to them to do so. We have to create conditions that will help them become the kind of people Maslow describes in this passage.

When we examine people who are predominantly growth-motivated, the coming-to-rest concept of motivation becomes completely useless. In such people, gratification increases rather than decreases motivation, heightens rather than lessens excitement. The appetites become intensified . . . they grow upon themselves, and instead of wanting less and less, such people want more and more of, for instance, education. The appetite is whetted rather than allayed by gratification. Growth is, *in itself*, a rewarding and exciting process.¹³

I think the experience of successful writers clearly fits into this pattern. The sense of achievement they get from completing a good piece of writing makes them want to write more because the process itself has become exciting and challenging. And I think the process works not only in professionals, but in students as well. By the end of every semester, most students who have made substantial progress in my classes are asking what other writing courses they can take, and every year our department has more demand for new kinds of advanced writing courses. Once writing students have been successful and tasted the exhilaration of writing something they're proud of, they're hooked. Now being just a fair writer isn't enough for them; they want to become even better.

How Can We Promote Growth in Student Writers?

The key question is, "What actions can we take that will nurture this kind of growth in our students, particularly the talented ones who have so much to gain if they can break away from their formulas?" I think again we can learn from Maslow. He says that all people have two sets of forces operating within them: a need for safety and a fear of risk on one hand, and an urge toward growth and autonomy on the other. We are all torn between these opposites.

I think competent college writers who want to do well in their courses espe-

cially feel this tension; their instinct for safety makes them want to write by formulas and rules so that they won't be penalized, but the creative risk-taking part of their personalities wants to forget formulas and gamble on writing something fresh and authentic. I realize this at the beginning of each term when I ask my students to fill out an information sheet that asks, among other questions, "How do you feel about writing?" A surprising number tell me that they really enjoy writing and that it's important to them. Moreover, a surprising number also write long journal entries, often doing candid expressive writing. Yet when class begins, these same students get anxious and begin to ask about topic sentences, length requirements, and sentence fragments. It's obvious that, in many ways, they're still rule-ridden, and their anxiety about avoiding penalties surfaces when they get an assignment. I have been able to ease that anxiety considerably by making it clear that since all writing assignments will be done in multiple, ungraded drafts, they will be able to revise and correct their papers before any grade is assigned to them.

Their manifest anxieties illustrate Maslow's theory that a person's need for safety will take priority over her desire for growth; thus when people are in a situation where they feel insecure, they will choose the safe option rather than take risks. If, however, they can balance within themselves the desire for safety and their impulse to take risks, they can grow in small steps. They risk a little, and if they succeed, they stop to consolidate their gains. When they begin to feel secure again, they will move out and risk a little more. And Maslow claims that if people can work in an atmosphere that is "accepting, safe, reassuring, supporting, and nonthreatening,"¹⁴ then when they gain mastery at one level, they will try for the next level because they will get bored with their accomplishments and want more. So individuals develop, both personally and artistically, by experimenting and making choices in an atmosphere in which they feel that the people working with them are more interested in helping them than in passing judgments on them. And I think students will grow as writers if teachers can maintain this kind of atmosphere in their classrooms.

To help students grow, we must find ways to encourage them to take risks. I am convinced that most people do not write well when they are afraid; they cannot use their abilities fully when they are on the defensive, trying to play it safe. And since we want to encourage risk, not penalize it, we must constantly remind ourselves as teachers that the more a writer attempts, the more likely he or she is to fail. But people learn through their failures, and even when our advanced writers try analogies that don't quite work or create images that are more melodramatic than striking, we have to reward their attempts by putting encouraging comments on their drafts and by being willing to give good grades for something that *almost* works. And when we get a fine paper from a student who has dared to take risks, we can use it as a model to reinforce our claim that in writing, as in other enterprises, the slogan, "No guts, no glory," applies.

We can also create a positive writing environment in our classes if we can get students to think of writing a paper not as an assignment on which they have to make an A, but as an occasion to engage with a new writing task and see how well they can do this time. The challenge is to move them from deficit-motivation and externally-imposed goals to growth-motivation and internally created goals. That's not easy, and I think an instructor is more likely to be able to accomplish this feat with advanced students whose skills are good enough so that merely writing a correct paper is not much challenge. If they can work on developing the content and polishing the style of their papers through sharing drafts with the instructor and with other students, many of these students begin to develop a professional attitude about their work and their papers become intrinsically interesting to them. They don't become indifferent to grades, but the grade become more like an editor's acceptance for the professional; it is important because it signifies that they have done a good job. And if, like professionals, they can also choose to submit only some of their work for final evaluation, they can become even less grade-conscious while they are developing a paper.

If one is fortunate enough to be teaching writing in a small seminar class that allows students and the instructor to get to know each well early in the semester, it is even easier to move the focus of the class away from grades and on to the writing process. My graduate class, consisting of only five students and me, developed into a community of writers early in the term, and we helped each other at every stage, developing a genuine interest in watching the progress of a paper as it developed. The students relaxed and began to enjoy working on their writing when they began to see that there was no model of a perfect paper that they were supposed to keep in mind as they wrote, and started to think of their drafts as representing stages in a process that they had to work their way through. They could see their papers evolve as they worked, and gradually they developed confidence that they really were becoming better writers. That confidence made them more willing to take risks.

The Writing Teacher's Most Important Contribution

So one can take specific action to create a psychologically positive classroom environment that will help advanced writers to overcome their timidity and their conservatism and start to grow as writers. Ultimately, however, I believe the most important single action a writing teacher can take to encourage students to take risks is to take risks herself, and in the past three years that is what I have done by sharing my own writing with my classes. Not old drafts of finished writing that has already been published, but rough, draft-stage writing of work in progress. Every week in my graduate course I exchanged copies of my draft with everyone in the class just as the students did, and—once they decided they could trust me—the students gave me the same kind

of feedback that they gave each other. They saw how much trouble I have with first drafts. I tend to be wordy and discursive, I am fond of extravagant metaphors and reluctant to give them up, and I am capable of writing a sentence with a 21-word subject that overpowers an "is" verb. Seeing that I seem to have to write badly before I can write well encouraged them immensely. As one graduate student said, "I feel a lot better about my own writing when I see that even you can screw up a sentence."

For my undergraduate class last term I duplicated drafts of three articles—and including this one about advanced writers made me a little nervous—as I worked on them, and I distributed them to the class, asking for their suggestions. And once they too decided I could be trusted, they responded well. Most of the time they made perceptive comments; they were especially good at spotting wordiness. My rambling, tell-them-more-than-they-want-to-know openings got to be a class joke by the end of the term. By the time we got to the third paper, one student asked, "Do you really think anyone would read beyond the first paragraph of this paper?"

As these advanced students work with me and with each other on drafts, often a surprising change takes place. They become simultaneously more relaxed about their writing and more critical of it. They are more relaxed when they begin to write a paper because they know I view first drafts as exploratory and don't intend to grade them. Second drafts, if we have time to do them, will also get only comments. Moreover, they realize that neither I nor their fellow students assume that the draft is the best work they can do, so they don't have to apologize for it. But now they are more critical of their own work because they have begun to see their potential and want to live up to it. As Maslow says, they have become "growth-motivated." And when that happens with advanced writers, in their writing classes at least, they are willing to discard formulas and trust their own impulses as writers.

In order to get such changes to happen—and of course, sometimes they don't—a teacher must invest substantial time and energy in actively engaging her students in a dialogue about their writing, and that investment can be exhausting. She must also make a strong commitment to writing herself, because advanced writers are more apprentices than they are novices, and they need a working writer whom they can respect as a model and a critic.

So working with these good students is not easy, and I think anyone who teaches two or three classes of advanced writers in one semester will feel drained at the end of the term. But teaching these students brings a bonus that goes beyond the considerable rewards of helping talented students become better writers. For me, the greatest gain has been that by working with them, I have become a better writer myself.

Teaching advanced writers has helped my own writing because gradually I have come to realize that their writing problems often mirror my own writing problems and those of many other academic writers in the humanities and social sciences. Because most of us are naturally verbal, we are often tempted to write wordy and overly-ornamented prose; because we want to sound schol-

arly, we are tempted to swathe our ideas in jargon rather than state them in simple language; because we are tempted to tell everything we know, we sometimes find it hard to focus tightly enough on our specific thesis; and when we get under pressure to produce in a hurry, we too are tempted to write what we can write easily and well rather than struggle to express new ideas that would force us to write slowly and painfully.

But when I teach advanced students and push them to correct these flaws in their writing, I am forced to cast the same critical eye on my own work. Moreover, my advanced students are a close and immediate audience, and I value their good opinion a great deal. Because I do, when I work with them on their writing, I must also try to write as clearly and tightly and honestly as I can. I too become a writer in process.

Notes

1. Paula Johnson and Judith Hackman, "The Yale Average: or, After Competence, What?" *College Composition and Communication*, 28 (October, 1977), 227-31.
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3. Wayne Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance," *College Composition and Communication*, 14 (October, 1963), 139-145. Reprinted in *Contexts for Composition*, ed. Stanley A. Clayes and David G. Spencer, 3rd edition (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1972), pp. 198-206.
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Call for Papers: Writing Program Administrators at 1985 CCCC

Writing Program Administrators plans to hold a special session, "The Changing Role of the WPA," at the 1985 CCCC. Past or present administrators interested in proposing a paper should send a two-page abstract by 30 May 1984 to Linda H. Peterson, 3813 Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520.